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The Biblical Foundations for Mission

Review Author: Philip J. Calderone, S.J.

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THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR MISSION. By Donald Senior, C.P. and Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983. xii, 371 pages.

Mission is an essential element and driving power of the Church that was explicit in the New Testament literature and has been manifested in Christian activity for twenty centuries. The God-given mission was not limited to the Jewish people nor to the Greco-Roman world, but was extended to "all nations." The Second Vatican Council formally underlined the Church's universal mission to all peoples and races, to all Christians and non-believers, to those of ancient eastern religions and even those who deny God.

The biblical foundations for the universal mission of the Church are investigated by two prominent American biblical scholars, Passionist priests, both teaching in the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. This is an impressive work of biblical theology, based on solid exegesis, but going beyond the merely speculative and academic to offer help for reflection on contemporary theological and pastoral problems. It is particularly useful since critical works on the biblical basis for mission are rare; two books were published twenty years ago.

The authors examine all the traditions in the Bible that reflect Israel's attitude towards the Gentiles and present evidence for the Christian impulse for universal mission which started with the person and teaching of Jesus and was dynamically effective in the early Church. Since mission is hardly a prominent concern in the Old Testament, Carroll Stuhlmueller approaches the material thematically, examining the traditions that deal with mission directly or indirectly. Since the New Testament explicitly highlights God's rule for the world, Donald Senior can give a more detailed analysis of universal mission, first as pertaining to Jesus' work, then as presented in the individual books. A third and concluding section summarizes the results of the study with an overview of mission in the Old and New Testaments and suggests possible implications for the Church mission today. The neat, clear organization of the vast amount of material reveals the authors' masterful pedagogy and enhances the book's readability. They aim at a wide audience of educated readers, but have added abundant references to help and stimulate further study.

A survey of some high points in this biblical investigation of mission to the world will indicate its value for contemporary theology and for a church now fully conscious of its universal mission.

The Old Testament traditions present the patriarchs and Israel as God-chosen people, holy, and precisely separated from the nations; some even emphasize a hostility towards the pagan Gentiles. Paradoxically there are currents moving Israel towards the nations, linking her closely to them in secular history, through her secular origins and the continued secular impact

even on her religious life. It is in the transformation from the secular to the sacred that the foundation of universalism can be perceived. Secular events (such as the escape from Egypt) are experienced, recalled in secular celebrations, and then kept alive in liturgical ceremonies that highlighted God's compassion for the weak and helpless. In this religious liturgical stage, the tendency to separatism present in the secular stages of event and celebration gives way to a universal thrust

enabling Israel to find in these same events a pattern of God's care for the oppressed, whoever these people may be. This insight into Israel's history could cut across national and ethnic boundaries. In no way does one have to be an Israelite in Egypt to be classified as oppressed or poor. This development whereby the liturgy invested secular events with symbolic value for an ever increasing number of people and at the same time stressed the need of caring for and freeing the poor will prove to be a biblical model very important for the world mission of the church. Church leaders will be asked to look for new examples of secular liberation that can be linked with the biblical exodus and be celebrated liturgically so that God's compassion for the poor will continue to be recognized through the ages (p. 15).

Secular realities and the nations as well often forced Israel's leaders to react and introduce religious changes. Israel also had to react positively, transforming secular events (like "exodus" and "Zion") into key religious symbols. In this process, Israel's religion gave new life and import to those secular events through the liturgy that kept them alive for future generations. All of this serves as model for the Church in utilizing the secular for her mission in communicating the gospel message and the knowledge of God's constant presence in the world.

This dialectic in Israel's history "between flight from the secular and absorption of the secular, . . . between elect status as God's chosen people and humble awareness of one's solidarity with the entire human family" is illustrated in greater detail from traditions depicting the people's "acculturation." This process involves different steps:

- (a) a new people or a new idea at first generates some type of violence or struggle;
- (b) a long process of indigenization follows by which the new people or the new idea adapts itself and become fully at home in its surroundings;
- (c) after the sinking of roots and adaptation to the environment, a prophetic challenge emerges on the home front (p. 39).

Numerous clear examples of this process from Israel's history (such as in the settlement of the land, in the exile, after the exile) also suggest parallels in the New Testament experience and offer biblical models for the missionary

apostolate of the Church. The prophetic challenge to Israel's complacency in her adaptation to the secular institutions of the nations emphasized the covenant of love between Yahweh and Israel, as well as the compassion of a God concerned with the poor and the defenseless. Clearly Jesus himself stands in this prophetic mold.

The central idea of Israel's consciousness of her election would seem to negate any concern for the Gentiles; Israel's election and world mission are almost contradictory. This problem for the theology of mission merits careful treatment in a full chapter. Israel was chosen, not at the moment of independence or settlement in the land, but at a low point of helplessness; her election came not from rights and privileges, but from God's love, and demanded the responsibility of sharing his goods. Israel's attitudes towards foreigners varied in different periods and in different traditions; negative reactions were more common. Yet, paradoxically, the love of God experienced by Israel was seen, even if dimly and infrequently, as reaching out, bringing salvation and light to the Gentiles.

A final chapter on the Old Testament presents Israel's prayer, the psalms basically, as intuiting God's universal power and hence also his concern for universal salvation.

The present reviewer has concentrated on the Old Testament investigation of mission because of his professional academic interests, and also because of a general unfamiliarity with the tendencies towards universalism present in Israel's religious traditions. But it is the New Testament material that explicitly manifests divine concern for all nations, first in the person and ministry of Jesus, then in the activity of the early Christian communities.

Though Jesus did not exercise a mission for the Gentiles, much of his teaching and ministry became an inspiration to the post-Easter churches and led them to include the nations in their spreading of the good news. Jesus' announcement of God's coming rule and of conversion in response to his love, together with his healing and concern for the outcast, continued Israel's prophetic role and challenged the narrow particularism of his contemporaries. The eschatological thrust tended to extend or destroy boundaries and bring the Gentiles to the messianic feast. With God's power over death manifested in the resurrection, Jesus is revealed as God's Son, the Lord of the universe, and the disciples are commissioned to extend Jesus' mission to the world.

Following chapters investigate the biblical foundations of mission in the conversion and ministry of Paul the apostle of the Gentiles, in the letters to the Colossians and Ephesians that present the cosmic scope of Christ's lordship involving salvation of the whole world, and in the mission theologies of each of the evangelists. There is also a look at the missionary nature of the Church in the first letter of Peter and the book of Revelation.

In the last dozen pages, the authors review the various means by which

the biblical message of salvation was transmitted and which could be of value to modern evangelists; the direct proclamation of the Gospel, the prophetic challenge in both word and sign, the witness of authentic Christian living, and direct action on behalf of humanity precisely to liberate from death and injustice. The authors also suggest several current issues and problems that the Church needs to address. Among them, there is the continual dialectic between the pastoral needs of the community and the call to mission outside itself, the struggle of church leaders to be universal with courage in the face of opposition, the need of religious experience to appreciate the Church's solidarity with other traditions and cultures, and the understanding of pluralism as a basic view of Christianity that must respect local cultures as in mission lands.

Clearly the book contains a wealth of biblical material on the Church's universal mission, offered in a clear and engaging presentation. It should be of substantial help in fulfilling the authors' desire "to support a vigorous contemporary theology of mission." This work can be heartily recommended to anyone engaged in New Testament theology or in serious study of the Philippine church.

Philip J. Calderone, S.J.
Loyola School of Theology
Ateneo de Manila University

WE DRINK FROM OUR OWN WELLS. THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY OF A PEOPLE. By Gustavo Gutierrez. New York: Orbis Books, 1984. 181 pages.

One of the great pioneers in Liberation Theology, now a household name, is Gustavo Gutierrez. In 1971 when he first published *A Theology of Liberation*, he already saw the need for a spirituality of liberation. *We Drink From Our Own Wells* is the fruit of more than ten years of his lived experience and continuing theological reflection on the spiritual experience of the poor and oppressed peoples of Latin America. Although a professional theologian, Gutierrez's fresh biblical and theological insights are authenticated and enriched by his direct contact with the poor of Rimac, a slum area in Lima, Peru, where he lives and works. The title of the book was inspired by St. Bernard of Clairvaux's observation: "Everyone has to drink from his own well" (p. 37). To drink from your own well is to live your own life in the spirit of Jesus as you encounter him in your own concrete historical situation. Gutierrez expresses the core idea of the book thus: